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Faculty of Business Economics

Master of Management

Master's thesis

Linking Influencers With Brand Love

The Impact of Influencer's Value and Influencer-Brand Fit on Brand Attitude

Valentýna Hýlová

Thesis presented in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management, specialization International Marketing Strategy

SUPERVISOR :

Prof. dr. Allard VAN RIEL



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This master thesis was written during the COVID-19 crisis in 2020. This global health crisis might have had an impact on the (writing) process, the research activities and the research results that are at the basis of this thesis.

Preface

This thesis is a final work for obtaining the degree of Master of Science at the Faculty of Business Economics of the University of Hasselt for the author, V. Hýlová.

I would firstly like to thank and show my full gratefulness to my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Allard van Riel, who made this work possible. It was fast communication, constructive feedback, and most importantly the patient guidance, which I appreciate the most.

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Abstract

Purpose

Taking seriously the global trend of digitalization in the marketing sphere, the focus of this study aimed to examine the impact of Instagram influencers on consumer's attitude towards the endorsed brand. Apart from comparing different types of influencers (authenticity and credibility were manipulated), we added influencer-brand fit (match between them in terms of their interests, beliefs, and values), to see whether the impact on attitude towards the endorsed brand can differ. Additionally, we aimed to go deeper and discover whether the same variables can have a different impact on the feeling of brand love in consumer's mind. Lastly, we wanted to discover whether there is a mediating effect of attitude towards an endorsed brand that can evolve into brand love over time.

Methodology

An online experiment was employed (n = 80) with two carefully chosen variables: **type of influencer** (high-value influencer vs. low-value influencer) and type of **influencer-brand fit** (fit vs. no fit). A single not well-known influencer (to control bias) was chosen to be engaged in this study. Her traits of authenticity and credibility were manipulated to create an image of a high-value (authentic and credible) or low-value (inauthentic and not credible) influencer. Further, two different brands were cautiously selected. The first brand was in the wine industry, which was matching the interests of our influencer. The second brand was a no fit as it was in the soda industry targeting sportive teenagers. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of four scenarios, which was described to him/her using textual and visual materials that were edited to match the Instagram platform to create the appropriate feeling. T-tests were conducted to assess the success of the manipulations. Further, MANOVA and regression analyses were conducted to test the hypotheses.

Findings

The findings of this study revealed some interesting insights. It found empirical evidence that there is no correlation between the type of influencer and the attitude towards the endorsed brand. However, this cannot be said when measuring brand love. The results showed that high-value influencer has a more positive effect on creating a feeling of brand love than a low-value influencer. Even though this was not the primary aim of the study, we found out that the trait of authenticity in influencer is perceived to be more significant and more strongly demanded than credibility. The results further supported the positive effect of the influencer-brand fit. The matching endorser with a brand is more prone to be viewed as a valid source of information and, in turn, an improved attitude towards the endorsed brand or even brand love can be expected. The further investigated relationship whether attitude towards the endorsed brand can lead to a brand love was only supported for the fit not for the influencer.

To put it simply, the type of fit matters when shaping the attitude towards the brand, which in turn leads to brand love. The type of influencer does not have an effect when talking about attitude towards the brand. But it has a consequence on brand love.

Limitations

Despite the contribution and additional value this study brings, there are still some limiting factors of the approach that should be considered. It is important to mention that there might be an insufficiency of the data for analysis. Only the bottom level of the absolute necessary number of responses was reached after the data cleaning, resulting in 20 responses per scenario. Further, limited settings were used, such as the utilization of solely one social media platform, study positioned to the food industry, the influencer might not have seemed likable to everybody for example due to the physical or social attractiveness. Lastly, brand love is developed over a period of time and love is the ultimate outcome of the process. Due to the experimental design, participants were asked questions about brand love based on their assumptions about their future relationship with the given brand. This might be challenging and not completely reliable. Given this, the direction of effects consequently cannot be ascertained beyond doubt.

Value

In this rapidly changing environment, it is important to become more knowledgeable about future possibilities and different impacts of cooperation between brands and influencers. The present study sheds more light on influencer marketing over social media. Brands must understand influencer management in order to choose the best-suited influencer to promote a given product without damaging the name of the brand (or perhaps the influencer). The real challenge for advertisers, therefore, is to single out the most efficient and suitable influencers while also keeping in consideration the type of product they want to promote. This can consequently allow for the enrichment of understanding valuable communication toward customers. Thus, these results are important for both influencers but predominantly for brands. It is of high relevance especially for companies since they are moving towards more digitalized communication to promote their brands and products. In defining these kinds of new digital marketing strategies, it is nowadays unavoidable to use social media and in many cases also influencer marketing.

Introduction

Recently, social media platforms have been experiencing a viral growth, which has led to a significant transformation of the media environment, and consequently, to a change in consumer behavior (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019; Breves et al., 2019; De Veirman et al., 2019; Boerman, 2020). Particularly the blooming of the Instagram platform has created a considerable surge in the amount of social media influencers, so called digital opinion leaders, who share their opinions, views, and sentiments online with their sizeable social network of followers. Influencer marketing (IM) is a form of electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWoM), which is the digital equivalent of the incredibly powerful Word-of-Mouth marketing (Lee & Youn, 2009). Initially, influencers' far-reaching impact was demonstrated by pioneer brands that were establishing and growing collaborations with them on Instagram. Other brands agitatedly followed. Nowadays, using influencers is perceived by many as a necessity when companies wish to spread a brand's message to a larger market (Bognar et al., 2019). Marketing is thus shifting toward the online sphere and the interest in the traditional advertising forms and techniques is lagging behind or it is sometimes even being abandoned (de Veirman et al., 2019).

For brands, one of the major challenging factors of influencer marketing is the identification and selection of suitable and efficient influencers. This is of high importance, as well-chosen influencers could have an incredible impact in terms of establishing and further improving relationships between the brand and its target audience. Making these relationships strong is essential for building outstanding public relations. Such relations can only be built through transparent, open, and authentic communication (Taylor & Kent, 2014). However, influencers are often selected based only on their popularity and network size (i.e., number of followers, de Veirman et al., 2019). But quantity should not be preferred over quality. In other words, the reach of the message is not the only condition for successful persuasive communication. Influencers ought to be credible, authentic, and likable (Moulard et al., 2016; Beverland et al., 2008).

Based on the above statements, this study identified two main factors that it will focus on. These are **type of influencer** and an **influencer-brand fit**. It is crucial to understand these terms before proceeding to the main research. Firstly, if we state "high-value influencer", "influencer with high value", or "type of influencer (high)" we refer to an influencer that is perceived as highly authentic, likable, and highly credible in the eyes of consumers. On the contrary, "low-value influencer", "influencer with low value", and "type of influencer (low)" means an influencer that does not possess these qualities of authenticity, likability and credibility. Secondly, "influencer-brand fit" or "fit between the influencer and the endorsed brand" signify how much is the influencer in line with the endorsed brand in terms on their interests, values, and believes. In other words, is there a match between the main qualities of the influencer and the brand. The fit can be seen as high, low or no fit at all.

Due to the popularity and novelty of the topic of influencer marketing, there has been an increased scientific interest resulting in a surge of published research. Though, given the rapid changes

in the industry, this state of knowledge remains still relatively fragmented and tentative. Furthermore, experimental research on this topic has been rather occasional (Breves et al., 2018). Hence, to address this issue, the present study investigates the impact of different type of influencer (high vs. low) and different type of influencer-brand fit (fit vs. no fit) on the audience’s attitude towards the endorsed brand.

Additionally, relatively little is known whether the influencer interference helps to develop “brand love”, a vast amount of positive emotions and attitudes, (Batra et al., 2012) with the endorsed brand. Therefore, the impact on brand love is also discussed.

Based on the above, the following **research question** has been formulated in this thesis:

What is the effect of an influencer and a fit between an influencer and an endorsed brand on the attitude towards the endorsed brand and brand love?

The research question can be further broken down to following sub-questions:

- Q1:** *Does the type of influencer (high vs. low) have a different effect on the attitude towards the endorsed brand?*
- Q2:** *Does the type of influencer (high vs. low) have a different effect on brand love?*
- Q3:** *Does the presence of FIT (vs. no FIT) between influencer and the endorsed brand have a different effect on brand attitude?*
- Q4:** *Does the presence of FIT (vs. no FIT) between influencer and the endorsed brand have a different effect on brand love?*
- Q5:** *Can attitude towards the endorsed brand mediate the relationship between the type of influencer/type of FIT and brand love?*

The following conceptual framework (Figure 1) is developed to visually enhance the orientation. This study does not intend to primarily examine the relationship between authenticity and high vs. low influencer value nor the relationship between credibility and high vs. low influencer value. These variables are here because they are used to manipulate whether the influencer’s value is high or low. The variables of the conceptual model are further described in the following chapter.

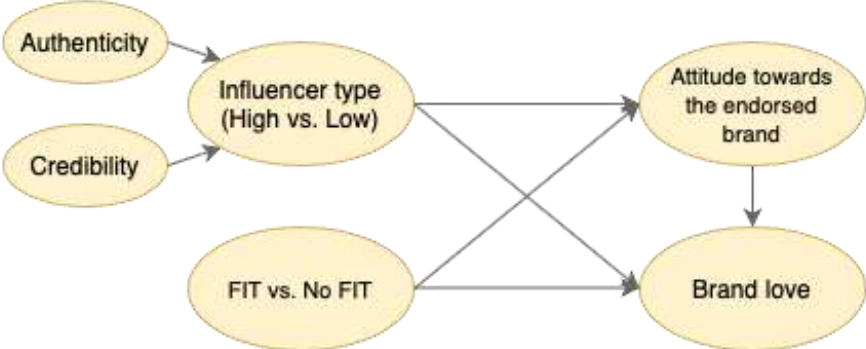


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

To address the research question and sub-questions, a cross-sectional study was conducted addressing Instagram users with the use of an online experiment. Instagram has been given a particular interest in this study for being the most popular influencer marketing platform (Boerman, 2020), with more than one billion monthly active users according to the two-year-old statistics conducted by Statista (2018).

Since the problem depicted here is constantly evolving and has not been yet deeply grasped, this work provides with some important results in the field of Instagram. It influences and contributes to the current knowledge in two ways. Firstly, it examines the effect of different influencer types (high vs. low) and different types of influencer-brand fit (fit vs. not fit) on the consumer's attitude towards the endorsed brand. Further, it goes deeper into whether it can affect consumer's brand associations to the extent of feeling love toward the brand. It is important to determine these two mentioned effects for brands and influencers to become more knowledgeable about their future possibilities and different impacts of disclosures in this rapidly changing environment. Thanks to this, the present study sheds more light on the influencer marketing over social media. It is crucial to understand influencer management in order to choose the best-suited influencer to promote given product without damaging the name of the brand or of the influencer. The real challenge for advertisers, therefore, is to single out the most efficient and suitable influencers while also keeping into consideration the type of product they want to promote. This can consequently allow for the enrichment of understanding valuable communication toward customers. Thus, these results are important for both influencers and brands.

Literature review

This section of theoretical literature review is organized as follows. It consists of two main parts. Firstly, part I. discusses broadly the “Influencer marketing” problem. It goes through the fundamentals of Instagram, social media influencers, and influencer marketing and reflects on the most important issues. The following part, part II., develops the hypotheses that follow the discussion of the first part.

I. Influencer marketing

2.1. Instagram as a marketing tool

Rapidly enhancing technological advancement is a major factor influencing the fast growth of communication devices and social media. Given that, social networking has begun to be an essential communication method in personal lifestyles and organizational activities. The utilization of social media that allows people to share content quickly and interact with each other in real-time, makes these actions much easier and more convenient than ever before (Bergstrom & Backman, 2013). Hence, people can build relationships with each other in a very effective yet nearly effortless manner (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Instagram is a worldwide photo- and video-sharing social media application for Smartphones launched in 2010 to be two years later acquired by the company of Facebook. Principally, it enables users to take or upload photos, pictures, and videos and subsequently edit and share them with friends and followers, even on different social networking sites (Hochman & Schwartz, 2012). In January 2020, it was ranked sixth as the most popular network worldwide right after Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Messenger and WeChat (Statista, 2020). Till today, it has reached the biggest milestone in June 2018 when it surpassed 1 billion active monthly users. Its popularity is still expected to grow as mobile device usage is expanding. Compared to June 2016, the number of active users has doubled (Statista, 2018). Furthermore, more than half of the global Instagram users are younger than the age of 35, which implies that Instagram is especially popular among teenagers and young adults (Statista, 2020). That goes in hand with the fact that Instagram has positioned itself as a dominant and powerful communication and marketing tool to present products as images or videos since the younger generation prefers visual content over text content (Ting et al., 2015).

2.2. Social media influencers

The concept of opinion leaders was familiar to us already decades ago. Opinion leaders are known to exert an uneven amount of influence on others (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955), which is crucial for the spread of WOM. Nowadays, digital opinion leaders are commonly defined as social media influencers (SMIs), or just influencers, although, academic definitions for them are rather scarce. Freberg et al. (2011) defined them as “*a new type of independent third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media*” (p.90). Khamis et al. (2016) describe SMIs as micro-celebrities practicing self-presentation on networking sites, performed by the creation of an online image and the usage of it to appeal to a vast number of audiences.

The roots of SMIs can be tracked back to 2005 to blog platforms, from where they spread further to social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and Snapchat (Abidin, 2016). SMIs are usually deeply dedicated to one or a few particular passions and niches (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019) that mostly revolve around fashion, animals, health & beauty, traveling, fitness, food, automotive, business, tech, etc.

Scholars do not unite in the division of SMIs according to their follower base. According to Dhanesh & Duthler (2019), micro-influencers possess a smaller set of followers from 10,000 to 500,000 and influencer commands around a million or more followers. Meanwhile, Boerman (2020) groups influencers with up to 10,000 followers as micro-influencers, the ones with followers ranging from 10,000 to 1 million as meso-influencers, whereas macro-influencers possess more than 1 million of them.

Although SMIs have a significant social network of people following them (De Veirman et al., 2017) there is a noteworthy difference between SMIs and traditional celebrities (Gräve, 2017) like musicians, actors, athletes, etc. who run commercial content on social media. This doesn't imply that celebrities cannot be active on social media and have a noticeable audience of followers, nevertheless, SMIs are considered as to be more authentic, interactive (Senft, 2008, in Marwick, 2015) more credible, (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017), intimate, thus easy to relate to (Abidin, 2016) and much closer in terms of familiarity (Gräve, 2017) to their audience than traditional celebrities. SMIs' sets of followers are also known to be more 'niche', truly dedicated, engaged and connected (Boyd, 2016; Wissman, 2018). Additionally, in comparison with celebrities, SMIs are not necessarily known outside the world of Instagram.

As people tend to follow what they find 'aspirational' (Marwick, 2015), which can be explained as something people desire to own themselves but mostly cannot, SMIs can easily affect the perception of their followers in terms of opinions, decisions and even behaviors (Watts & Dodds, 2007). Furthermore, given that eWOM can be spread easily and fast, it can induce a viral effect of spreading quickly to millions of people online. In other words, SMIs' messages don't stay at their followers' base but spread further through the followers as they share the message on their social networks (Thomas, 2004).

2.2.1. Influencers and parasocial relationships

Influencers build their strength and power on so-called parasocial interactions or relationships. The term 'parasocial interactions' (PSI) was first defined by Horton and Wohl (1956) as an interaction between a spectator and a performer. In our case it is a follower and an influencer. Such an interaction is only illusional from the side of a follower as an influencer could be unaware of it. These interactions are short-term and nonreciprocal. Whereas, parasocial relationships (PSR) are long-term relationships developed by followers with media personalities over time (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Klimmt, et al., 2006; Schramm, 2008). These kinds of relationships encompass cognitive and affective interactions (Horton and Wohl, 1956), which result in a relationship equivalent to friendship and make the follower more vulnerable to their attitudes and behavior (Knoll et al., 2015). Followers are likely to perceive influencers' opinions as unbiased as influencers' endorsements are highly personal and shared in a constant flow of visual or textual stories of their lives (Abidin, 2015). Furthermore, Schramm (2008) conducted a study finding that parasocial relationships boost the influencers' trustworthiness in the eyes of followers. This, in turn, has a positive effect on purchase intentions. However, such relationships are self-established by followers and in the vast majority, the media personalities are unaware of them.

Some may say that relationship between a follower and influencer on Instagram is not fully unidirectional. Followers may interact with the influencer through the usage of comments or even direct messages regarding the content and the influencer has the possibility to reply. Yet, due to the high number of followers influencers have, it is difficult for them to respond to all engagements they get or have a full discussion with each. Hence, a real relationship between a follower and an influencer is unbalanced and still rather illusional than real, which goes hand in hand with the PSR definition in the context of traditional media personalities.

As already stated before, people on Instagram are inclined to follow accounts that they find 'aspirational' (something people desire to possess themselves but mostly cannot). It means that followers share the same interests, values and believes with their influencers. Especially women developing a parasocial relationship with a media personality express the aspiration of having the same appearance (Greenwood et al., 2008). Predominantly, the most cherished profiles are the ones that regularly support the followers and help them by reflecting a positive image of themselves. An Instagram user can create such a relationship with influencers by following their profiles and posts.

2.3. Influencer marketing

The traditional approach of personal interaction always required a common geographic location and face-to-face communication. Nevertheless, in today's world, social interactions are no longer dependent on these determinants. The current online environment yields countless possibilities that are generated in the digital environment. On account of the technological advancement, the audience is now more sophisticated, well informed and information savvy than ever before (Uzonoglu & Kip, 2014). What is more, due to technological enhancement, the consumers are no longer easily manipulated and controlled by companies and organizations. They are not left choiceless anymore to consume traditional brand-driven advertisements that they often find intrusive or disruptive. They can bypass or skip it by installing ad-blocking software, which makes it much more complex for brands to reach out to them. The exploitation of their sudden power made the consumers no longer just passive recipients of traditional advertising but they can be now deeply engaged in communication with the company or with other consumers. Furthermore, it has been widely researched that consumers nowadays are prone to place more trust in the judgments of others than similar than to submissively accept packaged brand messages (Goldsmith & Clark, 2008). This phenomenon is called influencer marketing (IM).

The attractiveness of IM is increasing by an unstoppable speed. The global market is expected to grow from 1.3 billion USD (2018) to nearly twice as much during the year 2020. The same speed refers to the number of brand sponsor influencer posts on social platforms, which is predicted to surpass 6 billion in 2020. Opportunities to integrate brands and brand products through online channels appear extensive. And the most flourishing and viable social network is perceived to be Instagram (Abidin, 2016).

2.3.1. The emergence of influencer marketing

With the rise of social media, people started sharing their insight into their personal everyday lives including their experience and opinions on a variety of things and topics. By growing their network, they became influential and their eWOM started to matter more. Brands commenced to notice them and in contrast to directly target the target audience or market through all kinds of traditional advertising they started to involve influencers in their brand strategies. Mostly, brands focus on encouraging highly followed and well-liked opinion leaders who are perceived by their followers as trustworthy and non-purposive influencers. By incorporating influencers, brands' objectives are to stimulate influencers to embrace and mention their products and therefore, to stimulate positive associations in consumers' minds. It can be viewed as SMIs being kind of mediators or a third-party between brands and an audience, which brands can use to connect with their target audience through his/her voice. Furthermore, compared to traditional celebrities, SMIs are more convenient for brands because of their accessibility and affordability (Abidin, 2016).

Influencer marketing has been defined by De Veirman et al. (2017) as a kind of native advertisement (paid ad that match the feel and look of the platform), highly credible eWOM, and branded

entertainment. Brown and Hayes (2008) consider it as a type of hidden advertising in terms that the paid content is often perceived by followers as organic. Influencers often mention or recommend various brands' products on Instagram and, commonly, that commercial posts are intertwined through the daily narrations of the personal lives. Henceforth, the content will most likely be perceived as an unbiased and genuine opinion even though some of it is remunerated. IM is very effective for brands wanting to (re)introduce itself or strengthen their position in a specific market (Heffernan in Steimer, 2017), especially for brands wanting to reach a younger audience or so-called "millennials" who are currently more and more turning away from the traditional media and moving online.

2.3.2. Working of influencer marketing

The great power of influencer marketing is built on the blurring line between what is a genuine endorsement and what is a paid advertisement (Woods, 2016). Paid commercial posts, also referred to as "sponsored", are generally practiced by SMIs after an agreement with a brand. The interference of the brand in the influencer communication of their product can range from minimal to maximal. When there is minimal brand interference, brands provide SMIs with some free samples of their products and faith that they will in return communicate some information about it further, e.g. in posts promoting the product through his/ her Instagram account (Evans et al., 2017). This is practically also referred to as barter. Further options can be inviting them to exclusive events and parties or it can go up to offering remuneration in exchange for a post. In the maximum interference, a brand can command specific requirements concerning the content (e.g., given a number of mentions of the brand in a photo, stories, etc.) (Audrezet et al., 2018). Hence, for influencers, it has become a commercial business to take and share pictures of their everyday lives online.

It is crucial for a brand to pair itself with positively evaluated influencers as it results in positive attitudes towards the associated brand. The image of the influencer might transfer to the brand by virtue of the endorsement (Schemer et al., 2008). A bad image of an influencer can harm the brand very quickly (Campbell and Warren, 2012).

If influencers incorporate brands in their feeds after an established agreement they are obliged to provide an adequate indication of the persuasive nature of their message as the law commands. They can do so by using hashtags like "#sponsored" or "#ad". It is important to disclose the paid advertising to followers so they react to the message more carefully. If they are not being informed about the persuasive intent they might not be propelled to respond to a persuasive situation and that make them more vulnerable to deception. Nevertheless, followers are still keen on accepting their recommendations (Boerman et al., 2017). Scholars in marketing and advertising agree on the fact that consumers react differently, in a negative way, after becoming aware of the content being sponsored without the right indication. Accordingly, there is need for SMIs to take their commercial business responsibly and to stay open, transparent and ethical when engaging with their audience

in a form of advertising or persuasion (Evans et al., 2017; Lee, Kim & Ham, 2016; Tsetsura & Aziz, 2018).

2.3.3. SMIs' product posts

Instagram influencers' product posts are often distributed through their accounts on Instagram. The form of this influencer marketing is delineated as a hybrid form of marketing. In other words, it is a combination of *eWOM* and *product placement*. All remunerated efforts of SMIs to influence an audience to obtain a commercial benefit for brands, using non-commercial communication (Shrum, 2012).

If a product post has no brand influence and is perceived as genuine and spontaneous, it is linked with the influencer eWOM. Whereas if a product post has an external influence from a paying brand, it is perceived by the audience as sponsored, and is linked with product placement. It can be characterized as being vastly influenced by the brand and the SMIs are known to receive some form of compensation from the brand for mentioning it (Carr & Hayes, 2014). Sometimes, it can be unclear which form of review is the influencer using. However, consumers' suspicion of sponsorship is likely to be intensified after the influencer product review encompasses only the strength of an advocated position (Hwang & Jeong, 2016). That can affect the source credibility very negatively. Especially if followers do not know much about the influencer behind the product review, they will perceive the credibility of the source primarily based on message characteristics, e.g. sidedness of the review, sponsorship disclosure (Stubb & Colliander, 2019).

2.3.3.1. eWOM

Henning-Thurau et al. (2004, p. 39) defined eWOM as *"any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet"*. Social media, in general, have fostered and accelerated its spread and now it is widely recognized (De Veirman et al., 2017). Particularly Instagram lends out itself greatly for eWOM purposes as brands and products can be visually imaged and described in a caption under the photo.

It has been researched and confirmed many times that eWOM or any information consumers get from interpersonal sources, such as family or friends, affects consumer decision-making in a much broader way than traditional advertising techniques. The same message is being more authentic and credible when it is communicated by a fellow consumer than when it is done by an advertiser (Goldsmith & Clark, 2008). Consumers have always shown appreciation to the opinions of others, however, the entry of the Internet and social media particularly resulted in an even stronger value of peer recommendations. It suddenly enabled consumers to share their opinions with way too many. As a consequence, consumers and more specifically teenagers are getting more aware of the products and services they tend to purchase. They often look for other customers' reviews, rather than only relying on the product advertisement before they make a purchase decision (Sa'ait

et al., 2016). And it works in terms of eWOM influencing customers' behavior as recent studies have demonstrated (Lopez & Sicilia, 2013; Henning-Thurau and Walsh, 2004). Traditional advertising media appear to be losing their power and effectiveness over peer reviews (Lopez & Sicilia, 2013).

Nonetheless, eWOM turns to be less reliable and effective once consumers recognize that the influencer is provided with remuneration for spreading the review. It will be perceived as a less genuine experience (Sa'ait et al., 2016).

2.3.3.2. Product placement

Product placement can be defined as "purposeful incorporation of brands into editorial content" (Kamleitner & Jyote, 2013). It is a form of influencer marketing as it intentionally incorporates integrating brand messages into media content (Russell & Belch, 2005), although, it originates from the traditional, usually storytelling, media such as movies, TV shows or even books (Auderzet et al., 2018). Specialists rely upon product placement as it shows the product in a situation similar to a consumers' consumption usage meanwhile being placed in an entertaining environment into which the consumers may project themselves (Russell & Stern, 2006). Whence, consumers can envision how to use the product in real-life situations (e.g. drinking exact energy drink when being at a sports event, using a particular device for preparing juices or eating specific vitamins when feeling sick). The utilization of product placement in influencer marketing can be truly powerful due to the persuasive character it has on followers. They have tendency of developing an impression of friendship with their admired influences, as previously stated, called parasocial relationships and are ready to replicate their behaviors and choices of products and services based on trust (Schramm, 2008).

These pictures of influencers with products of indorsed brands are referred to as "Product placement selfies" (Abidin, 2016). It has been researched that the followers who are highly brand-conscious are the ones that are most keen to accept the product placement and are the most aware of it happening (Patton, 2014). Furthermore, when it comes to the exhibition of the product in the Instagram posts, the posts where the product is not well-integrated are less effective. Likewise, a wrong fit between a product and a storytelling and interests of the influencer's profile are also less effective (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015).

In spite of the effectiveness of product placement, it is sometimes criticized for its fundamental promotional intent that might be unclear to consumers. Moreover, there is often obscurity in the extent to which the content is under SMIs' control or is proposed by a brand (Boerman et al., 2017). Consequently, consumers can find it difficult to distinguish between which messages are genuine and which are tied to influencer marketing (Bhatnagar et al., 2004). Hence, to address this issue of potential confusion amid consumers, there have been developed *social media advertising policy standards and guidelines* in order to stop the sharing of misleading commercial content by influencers on social media by WOMMA (Word of Mouth Marketing Association, 2013). These regulations imply that any post of a third-party source, e.g., an Instagram influencer, on social media that is remunerated by the endorsed brand, should be entirely revealed as such. Thus, influencers'

fundamental job of sponsorship disclosures is to clearly state that it is an advertisement. By doing so, consumers' persuasion knowledge will be activated (Boerman et al., 2017). However, even though all SMIs are demanded to follow the regulations and point on the sponsored content, research reveals that not everyone does (Walter, 2008).

As a result of that, a new phenomenon has started to occur. Influencers keep mentioning that they have a non-sponsored content, as Stubb & Colliander (2019) refer to as impartially disclosure. By using a hashtag of "non sponsored", influencers want to make clear to their audience that the content is genuine and consumers should not suspect any sponsorships (Liljander et al., 2015). Another reason why SMIs might be doing that is that as it is known that not everyone discloses their sponsorship content accordingly, thus SMIs want to avoid any misunderstanding (Walter, 2008). What is more, if SMIs elucidate their partial disclosure or in other words a non-sponsored content, the audience is less likely to trigger their persuasion knowledge (Boerman et al., 2017).

2.3.3.2.1. Persuasion knowledge

Persuasion knowledge can be described as the knowledge and beliefs of consumers about the marketers' tactics and strategies. It can range from techniques that marketers use to persuade them, to the extent to which consumers observe these tactics and goals as suitable and effective to personal beliefs (Friestad & Wright, 1994).

Normally, consumers' persuasion knowledge is activated after an advertising recognition. However, this is not always the case when it comes to sponsored Instagram posts. The reasoning behind this is the relative newness of influencer marketing and therefore, the inexperience of consumers in influencer marketing strategies. Prior studies stress that in a non-traditional advertising format, such as social media posts and campaigns, consumers are more likely to struggle with the identification of persuasive content (Van Noort et al., 2012). SMIs are constantly sharing their opinions and views about various topics on social media, mostly to a product- or service-related brands (Gillin, 2008). That is why it is challenging for consumers to identify when an influencer is being authentic and honest about a product or service and when the influencer is sponsored to promote the product or service that he/ she does not find appealing.

When the persuasion knowledge is activated, it is known to have an effect on the attitude towards the advertisement (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Still, there are mixed results about it. Some studies found that there is a negative effect on attitude towards the endorsed brand if the advertisement is revealed (Boerman et al., 2012; Boerman et al., 2017). Whereas, some other studies show the impact of the disclosure of the advertisement is positive (Carr & Hayes, 2014; Jiang et al., 2017; Krouwer et al., 2017). Lastly, if the consumers are not informed about the persuasive intent of seemingly non-commercial content, some of them may not be triggered to respond to a persuasive situation and may process the message uncarefully, therefore, they are more vulnerable to deception (Lee et al., 2016; Tsetsure & Aziz, 2018).

2.3.4. Challenge of identifying the best-suited Influencers

Social media influencers, in this study Instagram influencers, are greatly searched by many brands and organizations that desire to embrace their accumulated social capital. Although, the main challenge of Instagram influencer marketing is the very act of identifying and targeting a suitable influencer (Araujo et al., 2017). Because the internet is being flooded by thousands of different influencers, such as musicians, athletes, cooks, etc., each offering slightly different topical interests, a number of followers and many more characteristics (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Therefore, it is crucial for brands to cut through the noise and detect the correct, best-suited and most effective category of influencers at the right time (Gillin, 2008, De Veirman et al., 2017). In addition to that, choosing a group of individuals who are most probable to generate a big cascade of influence through their eWOM is recognized as an influence maximization problem (Kempe et al., 2003).

As mentioned before in this study, Instagram influencers are identified by the number of followers following their Instagram profile. Some brands and organizations still use this measurement as a key to determining the best influencer, as they consider a high number of followers to lead to a greater reach of the sponsored message and hence to leverage the power of the given eWOM at scale (Veirman et al., 2017). However, research conducted by Aggrawal et al. (2018) revealed that this is not the case. Their findings indicate that the major elements that play a key role in identifying an influencer index are engagement, total reach, total sentiment, and total growth. Furthermore, it is already known that the like rate and comment rate (number of likes or comments left in a single post by followers), thus an engagement, are, as a matter of fact, inversely proportional to the number of followers of the influencer. To put it simply, an influencer with an audience of 1,000 followers was found to have an average rate of likes per post of about 8%. With the growth of the audience to 10,000 followers, the like rate declined to 4%. If we take into account influencers with a followers' base ranging from one million to 10 million, it was found to drop to 1,7% of the like rate. A similar pattern is to be followed by the comment rate, which is the second variable of engagement. This study was conducted on two million social media profiles by Bhuvaneshwar in 2017.

To facilitate the identification and tracking of the right influencers relevant for a brand, algorithms that are capable of that have been developed. These technologies are putting effort into counting various factors such as the number of daily hits on posts, the number of shares of the post or the number of followers. However, these numbers should be only viewed as a starting position as the online influencing is not about the quantity but the quality (Basille, 2009). Thus, this implies another very relevant issue other than the reach of the message that brands and organizations need to take into consideration when determining the relevant influencer and when aiming for successful persuasive communication. To enhance the impact of the message, they should additionally look for the most likable and credible influencer who is perceived to have a high value as an opinion leader but also should consider the match, or the fit, between the influencer and the brand based on the traits that both have in common (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Breves et al., 2019; Veirman et al., 2017).

Some brands may think that a mismatch between an influencer and a brand itself is not too detrimental (Salzman, 2016). But even though Instagram influencers may be sometimes viewed as credible even if they promote a slightly incongruent brand, research established that in most cases, endorsers are more effective if there is a fit between the influencer and the brand (Breves et al., 2019; Mishra et al., 2015). Furthermore, consumers might think that the influencer's eWOM concerning a fitting brand is initiated internally and they are promoting it because they like it, rather than motivated externally by offering an endorsement fee or advertising contract (Mishra et al., 2015; Koernig & Boyd, 2009). This can be interpreted as athletes are better fit for an endorsement of an energy bar compared to actors but on the other hand, they are not a good match for promoting candy bars, as Till and Busler (2000) found. Likewise, for instance, divergent products that make people feel unique by using them may be considered as less unique if they are posted by influencers with high a number of followers, which might lead to a change in an attitude towards a brand (Veirman et al., 2017). The real challenge for advertisers, therefore, is to single out the most efficient and suitable influencers while also keeping into consideration the type of product they want to promote.

II. Hypothesis development

The effect of the type of influencer

To proceed to the development of the hypotheses, it is necessary to start with defining authenticity and credibility, concepts that are used in order to manipulate the value of an influencer to high or low.

Authenticity

The attribute of authenticity, or also referred to as genuineness, has raised on its importance in the marketing research lately. Consumers progressively demand more and more authentic products, brands or influencers (Chronis & Hampton, 2008), as it enhances message receptivity (Labrecque et al. 2011), and improves message quality (Moulard et al., 2016).

While the conception of authenticity revolves around what is true or real (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010), scholars in marketing identified multiple meanings of this particular concept. One of the most noteworthy frameworks of authenticity in marketing was developed by Grayson and Martinec (2004). It encompasses two types of authenticity, indexical and iconic. Indexical authenticity was defined as being original and real, for instance a painting, where all the other object is just inauthentic replicas and copies. On the other hand, iconic authenticity is suggested to mean if an object is comprehended to be an accurate image or representation of something else. However, this study turns around only inanimate objects.

Therefore, a different concept of authenticity has to be taken into account when embracing the motivations of individuals or marketers. Deci and Ryan (2000) came with a self-determination theory of authenticity, which incorporates an individual's engagement from internally motivated behavior, such as passions and desires. Thus, it includes "active engagement tasks that (one) find interesting." Opposite to this claim, inauthenticity includes engagement in externally motivated behavior, driven by forces like reward or punishment and often specified by other individuals or groups. When it comes to branding, the last-mentioned explanation of authenticity centers on the extent to which consumers perceive brands. The term brand can be both human brand (e.g., influencers) or product or service brand (Moulard et al., 2016). Authentic brands carry out business because they find joy in the process of doing it and it provides them with hedonic value (Beverland et al., 2008). On the other hand, inauthentic brands carry out the business just to increase profits and their prestige (Moulard et al., 2016).

Credibility

The credibility of the source is continually being used in research on advertising as a significant indicator of advertising effectiveness. It turns over whether the source is perceived by the consumer as believable, unbiased, factual, or true (Hass, 1981). Several dimensions drive an individual's perception of source credibility. Scholars agree on expertise, or in other words competence (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007), and trustworthiness. While according to Ohanian (1990) it is further physical

attractiveness, Rogers and Bhowmik (1970) emphasize the reliability of the source as a third factor, and McCroskey and Teyen (1999) identified goodwill to complement the other two.

Expertise/ competence - the level of knowledge and experience in the domain, the extent to which an individual is believed to be a legitimate source of information (Ohanian, 1990);

Trustworthiness – perceived honestly, morality, believability, the integrity of the source (Ohanian, 1990; Erdogan, 1999);

Attractiveness – a study conducted by Kamins (1990) found that an attractive individual promoting attractiveness-related products was found to be more credible than a less attractive individual;

Goodwill – perceived caring about an individual’s audience (McCroskey & Teyen, 1999).

Commonly, if the source abounds with the latter mentioned dimension, it is considered highly credible and it has a positive impact and can influence the consumer’s attitude towards the endorsed brand (Ohanian, 1990; Mishra et al., 2015; Erdogan, 1999). On the opposite, under circumstances when the customers speculate about the message being biased or inauthentic, source credibility can vigorously decrease leading to impaired attitude towards the associated brand (Lee & Koo, 2012). Campbell and Warren (2012) affirmed the same; a poor image can quickly escalate to a ruined attitude towards the endorsed brand.

As mentioned before, if an influencer is perceived as highly authentic and highly credible in the eyes of consumers, it is considered as a high-value influencer. On the contrary, when an influencer performs inauthentically and lacks credibility, he/ she is considered as a low-value influencer. According to a study conducted by Schemer et al. (2008), which describes that pairing a brand with positively evaluated influencers leads to a positive attitude towards a brand, we hypothesize the following:

H1: *A high-value influencer has a positive effect on the attitude towards the endorsed brand, compared to a low-value influencer.*

H2: *A high-value influencer has a positive effect on the brand love, compared to a low-value influencer.*

The presence of FIT

Regarding the previous research, contradictory information were identified concerning the role of the fit between an influencer and endorsed brand. For instance, Chahal (2016) identified that credible and authentic influencers remain credible only as long as they remain in line with the endorsed brand (Chahal, 2016). Likewise, others (Mishra et al., 2015; Kamins, 1990; Koerning & Boyd, 2009) agreed that the fit leads to higher source credibility. However, Tukachinsky (2010) stated that the impact of a low influencer-brand fit can be diminishing when the consumer has a good para-social relationship established with the given influencer. This, in other words, can be interpreted as the fit being less critical for estimating the influencer credibility.

Colliander & Erlandsson (2015) stand on this side as well when they communicated that posts that are not consistent with the storytelling and believes of the influencer are less effective.

In the authors' view, and based on the presented theories and research, there is some significance of the FIT between an influencer and endorsed brand which led us to formulate the following hypotheses:

H3: *Compared to a low FIT, a high FIT between influencer and the endorsed brand has a positive effect on attitude towards the endorsed brand.*

H4: *Compared to a low FIT, a high FIT between influencer and the endorsed brand has a positive effect on brand love.*

Brand attitude and brand love

Attitude towards a brand is defined as a mental state of an individual, established by inputs of experiences and acquired information, structuring the perception of the environment and preferences (Cantril & Allport, 1935). Individuals choose independently towards which brands they feel the most attached and have the most positive attitude. It is important to highlight the distinction amid the attitude towards an Instagram post, influencer, and an endorsed brand. These attitudes have an impact on each other nevertheless, they are diverse.

Brand love as a notion, relatively in its early stages in the marketing literature, is about a consumer—brand relationship with a vast amount of positive emotions and attitudes towards a brand (Batra et al., 2012). The relationship there is developed over a period of time, and love is the ultimate outcome of the process (Albert et al., 2018). The concept of brand love can be described as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006, p. 81). According to Sternberg (1997), it consists of three main components: brand liking, brand yearning, and brand commitment, and enhances brand attitude, emotions, attachment, evaluations, passion, and declaration. It thus implies a stronger consumer-brand relationship of love to a brand (Albert et al., 2008). In the context of social media, particularly Instagram, the form of a brand love can be considered as the "heart-shaped icon" and helps in representing the positive attitude in the consumer-brand relationship (Algharabat, 2017). This leads us to the following hypothesis:

H5a: *The perceived high-value influencer (compared to a low-value one) has a positive effect on the attitude towards the endorsed brand, which consequently leads to brand love.*

H5b: *The presence of FIT (vs. no FIT) has a positive effect on the attitude towards the endorsed brand, which consequently leads to brand love.*

Methodology

3.1. Design and participants

The hypotheses were tested with an online experiment with a 2 (type of influencer: high-value influencer vs. low-value influencer) x 2 (fit: fit vs. no fit) between—subject design. Since Instagram is an all-online accessible platform, the respondents were assumed to be most easily and predominantly reached online. Further, as the experiment was conducted online, it has a lower level of researcher interference, which entails that the stated hypotheses are tested in a non-controlled environment. This allows for a non-biased view on the direct effect of the type of influencer and an influencer-brand fit on the attitude towards the endorsed brand. In total there are four types of scenarios, each with altered variables. The experiment is done through data collection where one type of scenario is presented to the respondent and questions are asked in a pre-arranged order. The survey was conducted on both mobile and desktop devices without any predetermined geographical scope of the research.

Data was collected in April and May 2020. A convenience sample of 84 participants was reached through invitations on social media or via personal communication. Participants (n=4) who never use Instagram or didn't complete the questionnaire were excluded, which left us with a final sample of 80 Instagram users. Given the online form of the experiment, it enabled to reach participants from 20 different countries, where 45% were from the Czech Republic and 17,5% came from Belgium and the rest were from other European countries but also North America, Africa, Middle East, and Asia. Roughly 95% of the participants were between the age of 15 – 34 years old. That is in line with the previously stated fact that half of the global Instagram users are younger than the age of 35, which implies that Instagram is especially popular among teenagers and young adults (Statista, 2020). There were no applicants younger than 15 years old and only a negligible amount of them between 35-44 years old. There is no representation of respondents above the age of 45 years old.

The general sample consists of 54,4% female respondents and 45,6% male respondents, which makes it almost evenly distributed between the gender. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four scenarios (high-value influencer and fit n=20, high-value influencer and no fit n=20, low-value influencer and fit n=20, and low-value influencer and no fit n=20).

3.2. Procedure

Participants who entered the questionnaire were first informed about the study as research about people's responses to different Instagram posts and were asked to sign an informed consent before proceeding further. Participants were afterwards given an overview of a brand, either a wine brand called Montevetrano or soda brand called Jones soda, together with a screenshot of their Instagram account (to manipulate the fit – fit vs. no fit; see Appendix A). On the next page, an overview of an Instagram influencer called wine.gini together with a screenshot of her account

followed (to manipulate the type of influencer – high vs. low; see Appendix B). Participants could observe the materials for as long as they wanted before continuing to the questionnaire. The questionnaire began with manipulation checks, followed by questions concerning the fit between the influencer and the brand, further a screenshot of wine.gini Instagram post about the given brand and question regarding brand attitude, and lastly, brand love was questioned. In the end, demographics and a thank you page were present.

3.3. Stimulus material

The stimulus material for the type of influencer consisted of an overview of an Instagram influencer wine.gini and her Instagram profile screenshot. The overview of her was manipulated to create an image of high- or low-value influencer. Also, the screenshot of her profile was slightly adjusted in terms of her interests. In both conditions, the material was very similar.

The type of influencer was manipulated by two cues: credibility (i.e., honest, trustworthy, knowledgeable, expert) and authenticity (i.e., transparent, passionate about her topic of interests). Each participant was given a screenshot of the influencer account and the influencer overview. The introductory text for the high-value influencer stated:

"Wine.gini gives people worldwide a glimpse into her life full of wine through her Instagram profile. She has been doing this for many years and is very knowledgeable about her field of interest. Since the beginning, wine.gini has always been consistent in the topic of her posts. She is very passionate about the topic. People love her and perceive her as an expert in the field. She has built a reputation of always being honest and very trustworthy."

The introductory text for the high-value influencer was:

"Wine.gini gives people worldwide a glimpse into her life with wine through her Instagram profile. She has been doing this for quite some years but yet it is still a bit unclear whether she is knowledgeable about her field of interest. Since the beginning, wine.gini has been quite consistent in the topic of her posts. However, she is known to promote brands rather for money than based on her personal belief. People do not perceive her as being completely true. It definitely cannot be said that she had built a reputation of always being honest and trustworthy."

Stimulus material for the fit vs. no fit was manipulated by the given brand. The influencer wine.gini is in a wine industry, which was easily noticeable the given account information and also her name. Therefore, two brands were selected, a wine producer (Montevetrano) and a soft drink producer (Jones soda). Each participant was given a screenshot of one brand's Instagram profile and some little extra information about the brand. For Montevetrano it said:

*"Please, imagine a hypothetical situation where a **wine producer** called Montevetrano plans on utilizing an Instagram influencer as an endorser of their brand. Montevetrano is an Italian wine producer producing quality yet affordable wines since 1983. A screenshot of its Instagram page is present so you can make a better picture."*

Jones Soda was introduced with the following text:

*"Please, imagine a hypothetical situation where a **soft drink producer** called Jones Soda plans on utilizing an Instagram influencer as an endorser of their brand. Jones Soda Co. is an American beverage company producing and distributing soft drinks since 1995. A screenshot of its Instagram page is present so you can make a better picture."*

3.4. Measures

3.4.1. Manipulation check

Firstly, it was assessed whether participants comprehended the difference of the high vs. low influencer value. As most of the participants were probably not familiar with the terms high or low influencer value, these terms were left out of the questionnaire. Only the text introduced them to one or another type of influencer using the influencer overview. Applicants were afterwards asked two questions. Firstly, whether they find the influencer credible and secondly, whether they find the influencer authentic and transparent with the audience. Likert scale where 1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Strongly disagree was used ($M = 3,24$, $SD = 0,951$, $Eigenvalue 1 = 1,96$ and $Eigenvalue 2 = 0,04$, $Cronbach's Alpha = 0,743$).

	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
High-value influencer	3,66	0,796	4,45	0,00
Low-value influencer	2,81	0,911	4,45	0,00

Table 1: T-test Results for Influencer

To measure the perceived fit between the influencer and the brand, participants were asked on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree) if they find the brand's target market of users 1) a good fit with the influencer wine.gini, 2) similar to the influencer wine.gini (Zdravkovic et al., 2010). Next, they were asked to indicate the degree of overall fit or match between the brand and the influencer wine.gini on a five-point Likert scales, where: 1 = Dissimilar, 5 = Similar; 1 = Low fit, 5 = High fit; 1 = Does not make sense, 5 = Makes sense (Zdravkovic et al., 2010). The combination of a brand and the influencer: 1 = Does not go together, 5 = Goes together; 1 = Does not fit together, 5 = Fit together (Busler, 2000). Lastly, they were asked whether wine.gini is a suitable endorser for the brand using the same scale as the first question based on Busler, 2000 ($M = 3,02$, $SD = 1,12$, $Eigenvalue 1 = 1,938$ and $Eigenvalue 2 = 0,062$, $Cronbach's Alpha = 0,965$).

	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Fit	3,57	0,939	5,03	0,00
No fit	2,47	1,022	5,03	0,00

Table 2: T-test Results for FIT

3.4.2. Brand attitude

Participants were firstly shown an influencer post concerning the brand with a positive caption (see Appendix C). Afterwards, they were asked to show on a five-point Likert scale to what extent, based on the influencer's posting, do they find the brand: 1 = Unappealing, 5 = Appealing; 1 = Bad, 5 = Good; 1 = Unpleasant, 5 = Pleasant; 1 = Unfavourable, 5 = Favourable; 1 = Unlikable, 5 = Likable (Spears & Singh, 2004; $M = 3,54$, $SD = 0,90$, $Eigenvalue\ 1 = 1,969$ and $Eigenvalue\ 2 = 0,031$, $Cronbach's\ Alpha = 0,931$).

3.4.3. Brand love

The last factor that was measured was brand love. Attendants were asked to imagine that they would be seeing wine.gini's posts about how is great the given brand for some time. Based on that, they were requested to answer on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree) the following questions: 'This could be a wonderful brand', 'This brand could make me feel good', 'I could be passionate about that brand', and lastly, 'I could be attached to that brand' (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; $M = 3,29$, $SD = 0,74$, $Eigenvalue\ 1 = 2,8$ and $Eigenvalue\ 2 = 0,398$, $Cronbach's\ Alpha = 0,853$).

3.4.4. Control variables

To be able to control for attaining the right data, participants were asked about their frequency of using Instagram. It was measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 2 = Yearly, 3 = Monthly, 4 = Weekly, 5 = Daily) where 75,7% use Instagram daily, 18,6% monthly and only 3 respondents indicated that they never use Instagram. Further, they were asked whether they followed any Instagram influencer (1 = Yes, 2 = No), 76% indicated Yes. Lastly, their age, gender, and country of origin were asked.

Results

4.1. Manipulation check

First, normality was tested on the data. It showed that it was normally distributed thus it satisfied the assumption of the statistical analysis method used.

As already mentioned before, respondents were randomly assigned to one of the four scenarios where the influencer value (high vs. low) and fit (fit vs. no fit) were externally manipulated. It was needed to identify whether the manipulation sufficiently created a difference between the influencer types and the fit. An independent-sample t-test examined whether the manipulation created a satisfactory difference (see Table 3) which shows successful manipulation.

	Mean	t-value	Sig.
High	3,66	4,45	0,00
Low	2,81	4,45	0,00
Fit	3,57	5,03	0,00
No fit	2,47	5,03	0,00

Table 3: T-test Results – Manipulation Check

4.2. Correlation

Correlation analysis (see Table 4) shows some interesting insights.

All the independent variables correlate with the dependent variable. Further, correlation exists between the independent variables. Although, there is no correlation between the fit variable and brand attitude.

	Fit	Brand attitude	Influencer	Brand love
Fit	1			
Brand attitude	-,589**	1		
Influencer	,000	-,053	1	
Brand love	-,319**	,567**	-,234 **	1

**p<0,01

Table 4: Correlation Analysis Results

4.3. Effect of the type of influencer

The **first hypothesis** of this research stated the following: a *high-value influencer has a positive effect on the attitude towards the endorsed brand, compared to low-value influencer*. Similarly, the **second hypothesis** said the following: a *high-value influencer has a positive effect on the brand*

love, compared to low-value influencer. It was tested with MANOVA, with attitude towards the endorsed brand and brand love being the dependent variables, and type of influencer (high vs. low) as the independent variable. The analysis demonstrated that there is no significant effect of the type of influencer on attitude towards the endorsed brand (p-value = 0,568; $M_{\text{high-value influencer}} = 3,59$; $M_{\text{low-value influencer}} = 3,49$), whereas there was a noticeably significant effect found in the relationship between type of influencer and brand love (p-value = 0,029; $M_{\text{high-value influencer}} = 3,46$; $M_{\text{low-value influencer}} = 3,12$).

Influencer	Brand attitude	p-value = 0,568
	Brand love	p-value = 0,029

Table 5: MANOVA Analysis for Influencer

Therefore, H1 is rejected and H2 is accepted.

4.4. Effect of the fit

Hypothesis 3 proposed the following: *compared to a low FIT, a high FIT between influencer and the endorsed brand has a positive effect on attitude towards the endorsed brand*; and the following was hypothesized as **H4**: *compared to a low FIT, a high FIT between influencer and the endorsed brand has a positive effect on brand love*. Here again, MANOVA was used to analyse the data, where attitude towards the endorsed brand was inserted together with brand love as dependent variables, and type of fit as the independent variable. The analysis showed that there is a significant effect of the type of fit on the attitude towards the endorsed brand (p-value = 0,000; $M_{\text{fit}} = 4,07$; $M_{\text{no fit}} = 3,01$). In the relationship with brand love the result was also found to be significant (p-value = 0,003; $M_{\text{fit}} = 3,53$; $M_{\text{no fit}} = 3,06$).

FIT	Brand attitude	p-value = 0,000
	Brand love	p-value = 0,003

Table 6: MANOVA Analysis for FIT

To conclude, we can state that both H3 and H4 are supported by the data.

4.5. Mediating effect

Lastly, **H5a** stated the following: *the perceived high-value influencer (compared to a low-value one) has a positive effect on the attitude towards the endorsed brand, which consequently leads to brand love*; and **H5b**: *the presence of FIT (vs. no FIT) has a positive effect on the attitude toward the endorsed brand, which consequently leads to brand love*. Firstly, we checked that all the variables correlate with the dependent variable brand love (see table 4). Further, we can see

that only one of the independent variables correlate with the brand attitude mediator and that is the FIT. This signifies that brand attitude does not mediate the relationship of influencer and brand love. To see whether the mediation works for the FIT, a linear regression was conducted. Data showed that the FIT variable dropped out of significance level (see table 7). This confirms the mediating effect of brand attitude exists between fit and brand love.

Brand love	Brand attitude	p-value = 0,000
	FIT	p-value = 0,846

Table 7: Regression Analysis for Mediating Effect

Therefore, we accept H5a and reject H5b.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed some interesting insights. To the author's knowledge, this is the first study of a kind that assesses the effects of an influencer type (high vs. low) and a type of influencer-brand fit (fit vs. no fit) on a consumer's attitude towards an endorsed brand and especially brand love. Previous studies focused on the fit between the influencer and a brand from a perspective of the effect on the image of the influencer and the effectiveness of his/ her advertising such as intentions to buy (Breves et al., 2019). Other studies focused on different aspects of influencers as well from the size of the influencers' follower base (Boerman, 2019; Veirman et al., 2017), advertisement recognition and different types of disclosures (Boerman, 2019; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Stubb & Colliander, 2019), consumers' purchase intentions (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019), to influencer's perceived personality (Freberg, 2011; Liu et al., 2015). In building our hypotheses, the present study relied predominantly on the research from these articles mentioned above and their limitations which inspired us to test these new relationships. The findings have important theoretical, practical, and managerial implications that will be further discussed.

In brief, the results of this study suggest the following:

- 1) Customer's **attitude** towards the endorsed brand is not influenced by the type of influencer involved;
- 2) A high-value influencer has a more positive effect on **brand love**, compared to low-value influencer;
- 3) The presence of an influencer-brand fit enhances the **attitude** towards the endorsed brand and **brand love**;
- 4) Brand attitude can evolve into brand love after the use of a fit but not after using influencer.

There can be multiple theoretical implications found.

Initially, whether the influencer is highly credible and highly authentic or is not has no effect on the customer and his/her attitude towards the endorsed brand. This can enhance the understanding of relationship management of the brand over social media. There is no evidence that openness and transparency of the influencer can enrich the relationships between his/her followers and the brand, and therefore, deliver more positive outcomes, in terms of better consumers' attitudes. That entails that it doesn't matter for consumers who promote a given brand's product or that brand directly. The influencer will just raise awareness and the consumers will afterwards make the attitude towards it themselves. There can be other factors involved in the consumers' attitude making, such as reviews, that are not part of this study.

Secondly, if brands focus on brand love and aim to increase it, they should on the other hand take the type of influencer into account. The results showed that high-value influencer has a more positive impact on brand love than a low-value influencer. Even though this was not the primary aim of the study, we found out that the trait of authenticity in influencer is perceived to be more significant and more strongly demanded than credibility. This result might be attributed to the fact

that when consumers find themselves involved with a brand they reflect themselves (Algharabat, 2017).

Subsequently, results from this study found empirical evidence for the positive effect of the influencer-brand fit. The matching endorser is more prone to be viewed as a valid and credible source of information and, in turn, higher levels of influencer credibility that lead to improved attitude towards the endorsed brand can be expected. This is in line with the findings of Breves et al. (2019). However, in their research, they discovered that if an influencer is very well-established and popular he/she might be able to endorse a brand that is not a perfect match to his/ her profile if there is high a level of authenticity involved.

Lastly, we can conclude the type of fit shapes the attitude towards the endorsed brand, which can eventually evolve in brand love. This cannot be said about the type of influencer.

5.1. Limitations

First of all, we have to take into consideration the complexity of settings. As described earlier in this study, brand love is a mental state of an individual, established by inputs of experiences and acquired information,... (Cantril & Allport, 1935). Further, the relationship of brand love is developed over a period of time, and love is the ultimate outcome of the process (Albert et al., 2018). In this research, participants were asked to imagine that they would be seeing similar influencer's posts about how the given brand is great for some time. Based on that, they were requested to answer the following questions about brand love. It may be very challenging to imagine the future feeling towards a brand, and whether their attitude towards it could evolve into a brand love after seeing the brand for the first time (non-famous brands were chosen intentionally to avoid bias and eliminate the possible unwanted personal feelings and already existing attitudes towards the brand).

Secondly, the selection of brands may have an impact on the final outcome as well. Both brands, wine, and soda brand are in the food industry. Participants, even though not questioned about it, can have some dietary or mindset restrictions to consume these beverages. Such participants thus might have been inclined to answer negatively to the brand love-related questions.

Thirdly, the same issue could be caused by the selection of the influencer. Even if the influencer wine.gini was described as positive (in the positive scenario) it is still very subjective whether a person feels inclined towards that person or not. They may perceive her credible and authentic, yet they may have other barriers towards her for example not suitable social or physical attractiveness or attitude homophily, this concept suggested Sokolova & Kefi (2019).

Although the contribution and additional value this study brings, there are still some other aspects of the approach that might be criticized. It is important to mention that there might be an insufficiency of the data for analysis. Only the bottom level of the absolute necessary number of responses was reached after the data cleaning, leaving us with 20 responses per scenario. This is the minimum needed. To ensure that the dataset is bigger, longer, and more intensive data collection

with more involved sources could be used. Given this, the direction of effects consequently cannot be ascertained beyond doubt.

We believe that if all the limitations are met and elaborately overcome, the study might bring a significant contribution to the sphere of influencer marketing and relationship management over social media.

5.2. Implications

To maximize success while choosing the most efficient and suitable influencers as endorsers for the brand while also keeping in consideration the type of product they want to promote, the brand managers and marketers should take a thorough and careful investigation of potential cooperations before applying any strategy in order to not to create greater harm than benefit. Our model may help them to understand which steps to undertake and to what to pay more attention to detecting new suitable influencers and which of them are worth pursuing a strategy.

Our findings emphasize that fit is more important over quality. Brands should predominantly focus on choosing an influencer that is a good match and in line with the product they want to promote. In general, influencers should advertise brands that fit their area of interest and expertise. A study from Koernig and Boyd (2009) did confirm this with their study as well, although the focus of their study was inclined towards the outcome for the influencer while in our case, it is the outcome for the brand. Nevertheless, in neither case, both parties might suffer from cooperation that is based on not matching interests.

The findings are thus in high relevance for the brand managers and advertisers as the fit between influencers and brands has a significant direct effect on the brand attitude, brand love, and as Breves et al. (2019) researched, also on the behavioural intentions. They even suggest that a choice of non-matching influencer might hurt more the name of the brand than the influencer's image.

Brand managers and advertisers should take the type of influencer into account predominantly when focusing on building brand love. The type of influencer does not make any difference when considering the consumer's attitude towards the endorsed brand.

5.3. Future Research

There are limitations surrounding the findings from the current study that point to areas where further studies can prove fruitful.

To start with, it could be valuable to replicate this research using a profound qualitative non-experimental design implementing elements of long-term relationships with influencers. This would increase the para-social relationships that are not easy to manipulate. The first limitation of this study about the brand love relationship that was not confirmed could be overcome in this manner.

Additionally, this research only analysed two brands from the food industry. It would be beneficial to position the research in a different industry or industries as well to see whether it would have a significant impact on the results. Other different settings might be taken into consideration as well. It could be the use of different social media and platforms (e.g. Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, etc.) to be able to generalize the findings.

Lastly, while this quantitative study had presented some interesting insights into the follower's attitude towards the endorsed brand after being manipulated, a study that examines his or her deeper beliefs and thoughts could find some further rich insights into the follower's behaviour on social media.

As the importance of influencer marketing and their recommendations is growing steadily, the author is curious to follow the research in this sphere and how it will evolve or adjust and yield further recommendations for practitioners.

Conclusion

Grounded within the literature on influencer marketing, brand attitude, and brand love from marketing literature, and concepts of authenticity and credibility, this study aimed to examine the effects of different influencer types (high vs. low) together with different types of influencer-brand fit (fit vs. no fit) on the attitude towards the endorsed brand and brand love. Further, it aimed to examine whether the brand attitude can evolve in the mind of consumers to brand love. It showed that high-value influencer does not have a different effect on the attitude towards the endorsed brand compared than a low-value one. However, this was not the case for brand love. It was confirmed that high-value influencer has more positive impact than a low-value one. When it comes to influencer-brand fit there was a different effect confirmed. A better match between the influencer and the endorsed brand has a positive correlation with the attitude towards the endorsed brand and brand love. Namely, according to these results, it was confirmed that consumers do significantly react to the type of influencers in some scenarios and to the influencer-brand fit as well. We also found that attitude towards the endorsed brand does leads to brand love only for fit not for influencer.

Together, these findings have greatened the literature on influencer marketing and have updated the understanding of influencer marketing over social media. Thus, the main contribution of this research is an understanding of influencer management from the brand perspective. How to choose the most efficient and suitable influencer while keeping the type of product that will be promoted in consideration without harming the name of the brand. This is of high relevance since companies are moving towards more digitalized communication to promote their brands and products. In defining these kinds of new digital marketing strategies, it is unavoidable to use social media and influencer marketing.

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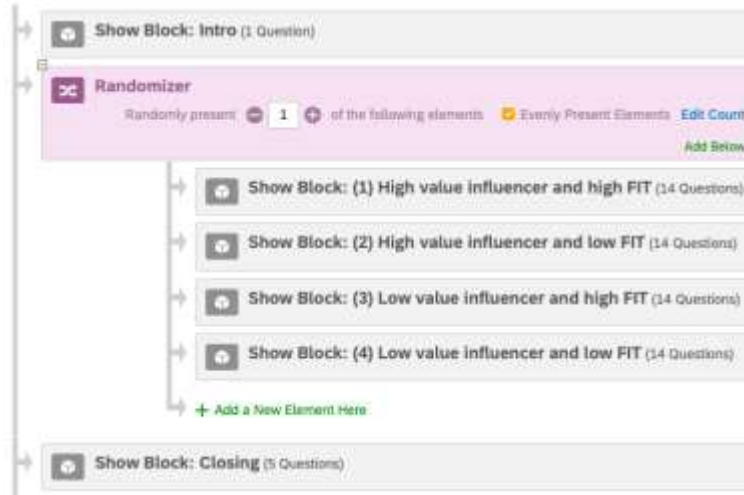
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Appendix

Appendix A. Questionnaire.

Questionnaire layout:



**Note: X used in this version of questionnaire was replaced in the real questionnaire with the brand name based on the scenario it was showing.*

Q1. I find the influencer **credible**.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neither agree nor disagree
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

Q2. I find the influencer **authentic** and **transparent** with the audience.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neither agree nor disagree
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

Q3. The brand X's target market of **users**:

is a good fit with the influencer wine.gini

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

is similar to the influencer wine.gini

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

Q4. Please indicate the degree of overall **fit** or **match** between the brand X and the influencer wine.gini:

Dissimilar	1	2	3	4	5	Similar
Low fit	1	2	3	4	5	High fit
Does not make sense	1	2	3	4	5	Makes sense

Q5. I think that the **combination** of the brand X and the influencer wine.gini:

Does not go together	1	2	3	4	5	Goes together
Does not fit together	1	2	3	4	5	Fits together

Q6. Wine.gini is **suitable endorser** for brand X.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neither agree nor disagree
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

Q7. Indicate to what extent, based on the influencer's posting, do you find the brand X:

Unappealing	1	2	3	4	5	Appealing
Bad	1	2	3	4	5	Good
Unpleasant	1	2	3	4	5	Pleasant
Unfavourable	1	2	3	4	5	Favourable
Unlikable	1	2	3	4	5	Likable

Q8. Imagine you will be seeing wine.gini's posts about how X is great for some period of time. Based on that:

X could be a wonderful brand

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

Brand X could make me feel good

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

I could be passionate about that brand

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

I could be attached to X brand

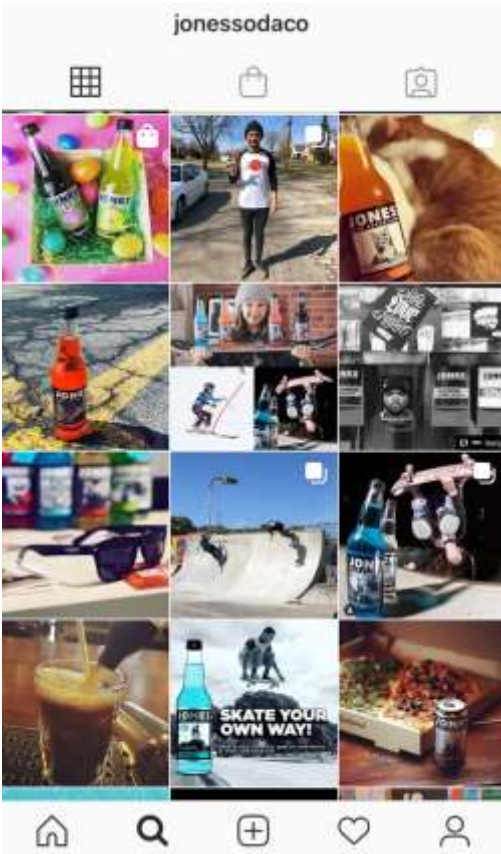
Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

Appendix B. Screenshots of the brands' accounts.

A) brand Montevetrano



B) brand Jones Soda



Appendix C. Screenshots of the influencer's account.

A) promoting brand Montevetrano



B) promoting brand Jones Soda



Appendix D. Screenshots of the influencer's post.

A) promoting brand Montevetrano



B) promoting brand Jones Soda

